

American Diplomacy

Supporting Political and Economic Pluralism: A 21st Century Diplomatic Approach

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Twenty-nine years in the United States Foreign Service taught me that the best diplomats are optimists. They believe in the power of ideas. They believe that sustained effort can lead to progress. They believe, along with Madeleine Albright, that America is an “indispensable nation.” In the never-ending search for a name for one’s professional credo, perhaps this can be termed “optimistic realism,” the belief that strategic, determined effort can produce results, tempered by a recognition of the limits on where, when, and how fast those results can be achieved. These convictions are especially tested in the debate over when, how, and how strongly American diplomats should support political and economic pluralism around the world.

The Historical Roots of American Democracy Promotion

The belief that promoting political and economic pluralism abroad is in America's interest—indeed is a strategic requirement—is not a new thought in American diplomacy. The American belief in the promotion of democracy springs in part from the very foundation of our nation. In his book, *Dangerous Nation*, Robert Kagan helps to clarify this thought by focusing on the basics of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary American foreign policy, which still influence contemporary diplomats. As Kagan writes, “The Declaration of Independence was America’s first foreign policy document.” Our diplomatic forbearers were “global revolutionaries;” the “rich lands of North America also helped unleash liberal, materialist forces within Protestantism that overwhelmed the Puritan fathers’ originally godly vision and brought New England on to the path on which the rest of British-American civilization was already traveling: toward individualism, progress and modernity.” Kagan notes that expansionism was crucial to both security and to this “new universalistic nationalism which inevitably shaped Americans’ attitude toward the world, toward their place and role in that world and toward what twenty-first century thinkers would call their national interest.”¹ Charles Hill, in his book *Grand Strategies*, intriguingly connects the literature of early America with an historical desire to promote democracy as a national foreign policy objective.² This is not to downplay the countervailing view, strongly held in early America and still today, that it is not the job of the

United States to transform the nation states that make up the international system. As I will argue in this paper, I believe that standing up for fundamental values such as the sanctity of the individual and the need for pluralism in political and economic life should remain an important American objective. It is possible to recognize that there is a difference between the objective of transforming nation states and the objective of supporting pluralism and people within nation states who want to transform their own societies. There will be costs and benefits to every decision. But as a principle, the Declaration of Independence is a document that has continuing global value.

I joined the State Department as the political and economic freedoms defined and codified in the 1975 Helsinki Final Act began to have their transformative effect. In 1977, then Deputy Secretary of State Warren Christopher introduced the requirement that the State Department produce annual human rights reports to raise the profile of human freedom in our foreign policy. This requirement was at first resisted by many in the State Department bureaucracy, and the reports to this day can produce diplomatic tension with countries that object to America's judging their internal affairs, but from Christopher's courageous beginning the reports have become the gold standard of human rights analysis. The key issues at my first diplomatic post in Islamabad, Pakistan in 1977 were America's competition with the Soviet Union, Pakistan's nuclear weapons program, and violence in Afghanistan and Iran. But American diplomacy there also focused on the connection between the lack of political and economic development in Pakistan and issues of what we would now call larger "human security." When I went to visit one of Pakistan's main political opposition figures, then under house arrest, he told me that there was one thing he admired most about the United States. I expected that he would say something about our economic development or that, as a former military officer, he would praise our military power. Instead, he said, "The peaceful transfer of power between one leader and another."

My next lessons in the relationship between political and economic pluralism came as I accompanied Deputy Secretary of State John C. Whitehead on four trips to Warsaw Pact Eastern Europe in 1986-1989. His message to every dictator in the region was simple: You are on the wrong side of history. You will never have successful societies unless you offer people more political and economic choice. America is ready to help you achieve these goals, but you must release your grip on power and let people be free.³ There were no takers. The true visionaries we met on our travels did not sit in Communist government palaces or offices. They were "dissidents," like Lech Walesa and Vaclav Havel, whose very lives proved the power of ideas. Courageous Eastern Europeans often showed us what they carried in their pockets for inspiration: copies of the Helsinki Final Act or the UN Declaration on Human Rights.

When I served for the first time in Turkey in 1989 as Deputy Chief of Mission, Turkish Prime Minister Turgut Ozal was then pursuing policies based upon his belief that the Turkish people would respond to his promotion of new technology, freer expression, and new infrastructure with entrepreneurship and creativity. Ozal opened Turkish society, in short, because he believed ordinary Turks would make good decisions for themselves, and in turn would promote national development and prosperity. His philosophy was simple: The government should build roads, and then get out of the way; the people will know how best to make those roads a foundation for development. He threw open the air waves and TV channels, some domestic and some from Europe, and promoted debate previously unseen or unheard in Turkey.

As Ambassador to Turkey some years later, I tried to highlight the power of simultaneity—opening opportunities to use one problem for help in solving others—as a foundation for Turkey’s development into a prosperous democracy.⁴ American efforts to promote Turkey’s entry into the European Union’s Customs Union focused not only on changes in economic regulations and philosophy, but also on the protection and promotion of human freedom, the protection of journalists, and the ending of torture. The U.S. and Europe leveraged what might have seemed a question of economic regulations into an effort to expand political rights. Similarly, America’s promotion of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline was not only intended to bring more oil to world markets. The pipeline would prevent environmental degradation of the Bosphorus. It would also promote economic development in Turkey's Southeastern region, that might, over time, promote increased freedoms for Turkey's Kurdish citizens and form a more positive basis for Turkish-Kurdish relations and Ankara's connections to local interests in the Southeast.

Back in Washington after Ankara, the work to promote the rounds of NATO expansion in 1999 and 2004 was explicitly about recognizing the connections between security, democracy and economic development. The same was true of American efforts, begun by President Clinton and supported by President Bush 43, to promote Plan Colombia: defeating narco-terrorism, supporting economic development, protecting journalists and labor leaders, and encouraging trade between the United States and Colombia were all part of promoting broader human security.

Two Assumptions About Pluralism

An analysis of how 21st century America’s diplomats can promote political and economic pluralism rests on two assumptions:

First, the capacity and desire of people to makes choices about their own lives is not limited by geography, race, color, culture or religion. Two voices from different worlds support this view. George W. Bush, in describing the Middle

East in 2003, said, "It is not realism to suppose that one-fifth of humanity is unsuited to liberty; it is pessimism and condescension, and we should have none of it."⁵ Nobel Peace Prize winner Muhammad Yunus said that the creation of the Grameen Bank, which he founded to give micro-loans to the poor, was spurred by an "unshakeable faith in the creativity of human beings. This has led me to believe that human beings are not born to suffer the misery of hunger and poverty."⁶

Second, it is the combination—indeed the simultaneous interaction—of political and economic pluralism that will form the strongest foundation for successful nations. This is especially true as we consider the challenge of developing countries. As the German Marshall Fund Transatlantic Task Force on Development Report Toward a Brighter Future makes clear, development, democracy and security must be fostered at the same time. The Task Force concludes that, over the long term, "There is no doubt that democracy is a core value, which also underpins long-term, generally sustainable economic growth, personal freedom and opportunity."⁷ This certainly was my observation over my years in the Foreign Service. The lack of economic development in Pakistan has slowed political progress there, and I am sure that the reverse is true as well. Slow progress in economic development in Kosovo has also held back political progress there. A key component of the Plan Colombia strategy was the Andean Trade Preferences Act, designed to promote trade between Colombia and the United States. A still-missing piece that would further promote peace and reconciliation in Colombia is the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement, which Congress has yet to pass. This FTA would lock in the trade preferences that for now must periodically be renewed by Congress, and it would help undercut the drug economy by spurring domestic economic reforms in Colombia required by the agreement. It would also be of great advantage to American exporters. In another telling example, Yasheng Huang noted in *Foreign Policy* magazine in 2008, "The emerging Indian miracle should debunk – hopefully permanently – the entirely specious notion that democracy is bad for growth."⁸

One key foreign policy challenge will be to recognize and deal with what Stefan Halper has called the emerging "Beijing consensus," an alternative theory that argues that, as in China, economic development, including some space for individual choices in economic life, need not be tied to political pluralism or individual freedoms.⁹ D. Chrystia Freeland has described this as a need to figure out how to confront the "moneyed authoritarians."¹⁰ As *The Economist* reported in June 2009, authoritarian governments are using their money to buy influence abroad. China's foreign assistance program is the most active. In 2007, Chinese leaders offered African countries \$20 billion in new financing. The World Bank reports that China already gives \$2 billion a year to Africa, more than the Bank itself does. Over the past ten years, Venezuela's aid has been comparable to China's, though it is now falling behind. Iran offered \$1 billion to Lebanon's

Shi'as to help them rebuild their ruined houses after the 2006 war. In 2009, Russia offered Kyrgyzstan \$2 billion, a gesture, by remarkable coincidence, made just after Kyrgyzstan had thrown out American forces from the air base at Manas. This was not terribly surprising: Russia has long used energy prices and debt forgiveness to cajole or punish neighbors. Autocracies can offer an attractive alternative to Western aid and to the Western theory of development. In the past decade, rich countries have tried to improve a dismal record of development spending by linking it closely to the priorities of recipients and by demanding good governance. Help from authoritarian regimes is rarely encumbered with such "strings."¹¹

A 21st Century Diplomatic Approach to Supporting Political and Economic Pluralism

When it comes to supporting political and economic pluralism, there may be debate about the "how," but there seems to me to be little question about the "why." The more people there are in the world who are able to make free choices about their political and economic lives, the better for the United States. The more people whose economic expectations are rising, the better it is for the United States. It is here where we return to the increasingly salient notion of "human security," based on political and economic pluralism, which leads ultimately to improved governance, greater and fairer economic development, and a more secure world.

So, what can America's representatives abroad do more effectively to support democracy? The answer is in the question: Over the past decade, the United States has often provoked opposition and claims of hypocrisy by "promoting" rather than "supporting" democracy. Supporting democracy requires a nuanced, long-term approach that includes encouraging the rule of law, institution building and basic pluralism as precursors to democracy.

First, as the Atlantic Council concluded in its 2008 publication *Enhancing Democracy Assistance*, "America's role should be to stand behind, not in front of democracy movements."¹² U.S. diplomats will need to emphasize "coordination" in democracy assistance, and underline their cooperation with local NGOs, activists, and, where possible, governments. Given that "promoting has become synonymous with imposing democracy,"¹³ a focus on the constituent parts of democratic systems—rule of law, governance, corruption reform—rather than an abstract endpoint may be in order. As Alexander T.J. Lennon notes in the CSIS study "Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy," reframing democracy assistance as a campaign to bolster freedoms might avoid local backlash and might encourage action from international third parties.¹⁴ Larry Diamond suggests that, "Partnership...implies an important operational change in programming, with indigenous democratic actors – that is, the candidate recipients of support – defining their own initiatives and priorities to which we

respond, rather than our determining *a priori* what they need and then issuing a ‘request for proposals’ or an ‘indefinite quantity contract.’”¹⁵ Since open endorsement from the U.S. government might delegitimize some democratic groups abroad, America’s diplomats must know when to speak out on behalf of their native partners and when to emphasize the roles of a local NGO.

Second, diplomats must recognize that the promotion of political and economic pluralism is a key example of the difference between engagement and diplomacy. Engagement is only one element of a broader, more comprehensive, long-term diplomatic strategy. Comprehensive diplomacy involves more than talking to your adversaries and does not produce results overnight. Supporting political and economic choice is a form of “evolutionary rather than revolutionary change and cannot be achieved over a short period of time or on a timetable.”¹⁶ Democracy assistance is the work of years and more probably decades. This is surely one of the lessons modern diplomats can take from the transformation of the former Warsaw Pact into what we now call Central Europe, nations that have become members of NATO and the European Union. The U.S. effort to support democracy there, along with those who had the courage to promote it in their own countries, was a sustained, long-term diplomatic campaign. It included public outreach through radio and television. It meant physical support for dissidents, including meeting with them in ways authoritarian governments could see and not see. It required work with non-governmental organizations and religious groups, most especially Pope John Paul II in the struggle for freedom in Poland.

Third, diplomats must know how to exercise strategic patience. This is not about being passive, but rather recognizing the difference between short and long-term objectives and recalibrating strategy when necessary. I often ask those skeptical about the future of political and economic pluralism in places like the Balkans or the Middle East, “If we were willing to put the same level of investment, creativity, and resources into those areas of the world today that we did in Eastern Europe during the Cold War—and were given the chance of achieving the same results—wouldn’t we take this opportunity?” I believe we should and we would.¹⁷

To be sure, these are two big “ifs,” and they recognize the limits of our financial resources and international political capital. The United States has many urgent priorities at home and abroad; not all of them can rank at the top of the list. It is also true that the Balkans and the Middle East today present a much different landscape than did Eastern Europe during the Cold War. But this does not mean we should forget about supporting democracy; it means only that we should be strategic about how we do so. A failure to encourage indigenous signs of pluralism means foregoing a potentially generous future payoff—even if that

future is decades away.

Part of exercising strategic patience is understanding that, just as diplomacy is not the same thing as engagement, elections, though historic moments, do not make a democracy. Diamond notes that U.S. assistance to local political parties must go beyond the campaign trail and must be part of a comprehensive strategy long after elections. Carrie Manning holds that the organization of parties, strengthening the links between party leadership and membership, and construction of coalitions are of more long-term importance than elections themselves.¹⁸ If parties buy into the democratic system, democracy can become self-sustaining. Unlike election assistance strictly defined, aiding parties and, more broadly, mobilizing civil society focuses not on an event, but on an attitudinal shift. This transformation is slow by nature. U.S. efforts to nurture the transition must be “gradual and serious, not just gradual.”¹⁹ There is also something to be said for the argument made by Dennis Ross and David Makovsky that elections are part of the process, but should not come first, and that there should be eligibility requirements when elections are held. As they put it, “militias and their members should not be allowed to run as parties or to field candidates. It is either ballots or bullets but not both, and potential candidates must make a choice.”²⁰

Fourth, our modern diplomat needs to speak out for the economic side of the pluralism equation. That means restoring the world economy in ways that encourage pluralism, such as promoting trade and investment and working to bring the benefits of globalization to those who have not yet benefited. It means shaping policies that recognize the link highlighted by President Obama in his speech at the 2010 Millennium Development Goals Summit: “over the long run, democracy and economic growth go hand in hand.”²¹

Conclusion

As Americans consider the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan some will argue that in the future, America's 21st century diplomats should keep their views on political and economic democracy to themselves. I believe that would be a shame. America's diplomats do not have to tell other people how they should live. But surely America's representatives abroad can say that it is our observation, no matter how much work there is yet to do to perfect our own democracy, that there are some fundamental principles which will make societies more rather than less successful in the 21st century. As President George W. Bush said in a speech to the National Endowment for Democracy in November 2003, “Successful societies limit the power of the state and the power of the military. Successful societies protect freedom with the consistent and impartial rule of law. Successful societies allow room for healthy civic institutions...successful societies guarantee religious liberty...successful societies privatize their economies and secure the rights of property. They prohibit and

punish official corruption and invest in the health and education of their people. They recognize the rights of women."²² Emphasizing the continuity of this pillar of American foreign policy thinking, President Obama told the United Nations General Assembly in September 2010, "each country will pursue a path rooted in the culture of its own people. Yet experience shows us that history is on the side of liberty; that the strongest foundation for human progress lies in open economies, open societies and open governments."²³

If terrorists and moneyed authoritarians succeed in keeping Americans silent on these questions, they will have won a comprehensive and disastrous victory. America's representatives should always speak out for these basic principles, even as they understand the need for modesty, strategic patience and the diversity of choices that others will make about how to organize their political and economic lives. This will keep America's contemporary diplomats connected to the great optimism that was evident at our nation's founding and is still one of our most important attributes.

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Endnotes

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11. "An (iron) fistful of help," *The Economist*, June 6, 2009, 59.
12. Lincoln A. Mitchell and David Phillips, *Enhancing Democracy Assistance* (New York: The Atlantic Council of the United States: 2008).
13. Alexander T.J. Lennon et al., *Democracy in U.S. Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2009), v.
14. Lennon et al., 25.
15. Mitchell and Phillips, 7.
16. Lennon et al., 33.
17. I recognize, as Neustadt and May argued in their book *Thinking in Time*, that we should reason from the right analogies, and that experts on the Middle East such as Dennis Ross and David Makovsky point out the flaws in thinking that the remarkable success in Central and Eastern Europe can be replicated in the Middle East, but I still believe there are lessons that can be learned -- particularly from the process which created the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe and transformed it to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe - which can be applied to the challenges in the greater Middle East.
18. Carrie Manning, *The Making of Democrats: Elections and Party Development in Postwar Bosnia, El Salvador, and Mozambique* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan: 2008), 4-5.
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21. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at the Millennium Development Goals Summit in New York, New York," September 22, 2010.

22. George W. Bush, "Remarks by the President at the 20th Anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy," (Speech delivered in Washington, DC, November 6, 2003)

23. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President to the United Nations General Assembly," New York, New York," September 23, 2010.

